

# Toward a Safer Future

Reflections on a decade of slow, steady progress in gun violence prevention; implications and challenges for the road ahead.

Summer 2023



THE  
KENDEDA FUND

**The ingredients for greater progress are in place, and I'm optimistic that fewer lives will be lost to, or changed by, shootings in the years ahead.**

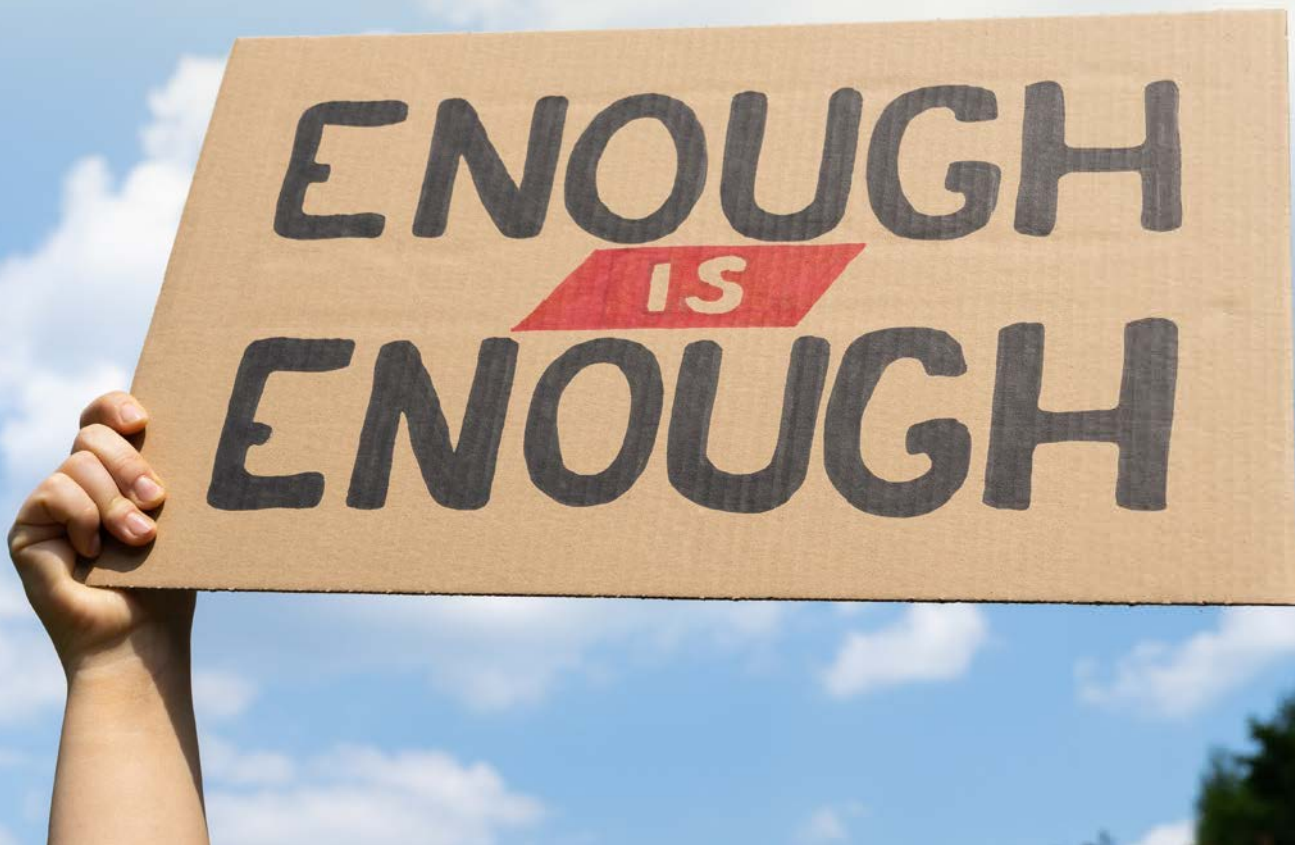
— James Burnett



# The gun violence prevention movement stands at a crossroads.

In 2022, after more than a decade of fierce advocacy, Congress passed landmark gun safety legislation known as the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The changes expanded federal funding for violence prevention and enacted new limits on firearm access for people at risk of misusing them. **That very same week, the United States Supreme Court expanded its interpretation of the Second Amendment** to include bearing arms in public, cementing in place an objective that gun rights activists have sought for a generation, and established a new standard for the Constitutionality of other gun laws, putting many on precarious legal ground.

The duality and tension in these changes underscores both the progress made and the challenges ahead.



## For the last decade, The Kendeda Fund has been one of a small but growing number of funders leaning into the nation's gun violence crisis and supporting a diverse set of far-sighted organizations decisively shaping its trajectory:

- ➔ The news outlet [The Trace](#) alters the public's perspective of gun violence, broadening our collective knowledge and focusing attention on new dimensions of the crisis.
- ➔ [The Fund for a Safer Future](#) (FSF) organizes foundations and philanthropists to invest in the movement more strategically and sustainably.
- ➔ In its fearless truth-telling, the advocacy group [Guns Down America](#) alters the tenor of the conversation about gun violence and expands our understanding of who is complicit in it.
- ➔ [Community Justice](#) is pushing the movement the movement to recognize and wrestle with its historical biases and sharpen its commitment to addressing gun violence as a public health crisis.

**Although these organizations have wildly different expertise and work on distinct aspects of what is now widely recognized as a uniquely American problem, they often reinforce one another.**

Guns Down America's principled stance towards corporations and lawmakers makes space for other organizations, including Community Justice, to speak truth to power. Both organizations help ensure that concern about gun violence extends beyond the narrow window opened up by mass shootings. Through consistent coverage, *The Trace* educates the public about the impact of community violence and gives more credence to Community Justice's contention that lawmakers prioritize it. Community Justice's call for greater intersectionality in

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10  
Years

25<sub>M</sub>  
and \$25 million  
into gun violence  
prevention

the gun violence prevention movement helps draw a broader set of donors to FSF and prioritizes equity in the philanthropic community. By enlarging the pool of philanthropies investing in the movement, FSF helps fuel all these organizations and many others.

**As the Kendeda Fund prepared to conclude 30 years of grantmaking** — including nearly ten years and \$25 million of funding for common-sense solutions to help prevent gun violence — we invited the leaders of these four established organizations to reflect on the strategies that brought us to this point. We also asked them to imagine some of the next steps on the long road ahead to a country free of gun violence.

The perspectives and opinions shared in the following pages belong to the four interviewees alone. While they are neither inclusive nor representative of the *entire* GVP movement, they offer insights into strategies and approaches that funders in the gun violence prevention field may want to consider moving forward. To that end, we offer this report less as a playbook than as a reference point — one intended to provoke, inform and inspire future investments supporting broader and more inclusive solutions.

Kendeda’s approach to gun violence prevention philanthropy emerged naturally from the values of our founder, Diana Blank. We viewed gun violence as one of the most urgent public health and equity crises of our time. And over a decade of giving, we sought to unite unexpected partners around replicable strategies, building on creative community-led efforts to find productive pathways toward a less violent society. Kendeda tested new violence prevention strategies, convened community conversations and invested in storytelling that moved beyond tragedy to points of agreement and models of progress.

There is much work to be done, and the struggle to end gun violence in America will require endurance, commitment, pain and struggle. But change is possible. Together we can — and we must — build a safer future.

### **David Brotherton**

Fund Advisor for Gun Violence Prevention




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**“Change is possible.  
Together we can  
— and we must —  
build a safer future”**

— David Brotherton

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# James Burnett

## *The Trace*

James Burnett  
*Founding Editor  
and Managing Director*

**For many philanthropists, investigative journalism can be a difficult sell. Compared to direct-service organizations more accustomed to quantifying their outputs, “the impact of journalism is a lot more uncertain and harder to measure,” says **James Burnett**.**

Still, few organizations have played a more decisive role in gun violence prevention in the last five years than **The Trace**, which Burnett founded and publishes. The outlet produces hundreds of original stories each year, ranging from in-depth investigations to breaking coverage of unfolding events, and its daily newsletter has more than 16,000 subscribers.



*The Trace's* **relentless investigation** of corruption and self-dealing at the National Rifle Association ended the careers of some of the organization's top officials and set off state and federal investigations that threaten the group's existence and undermine its legitimacy. The outlet's probing **coverage of community violence** elevates everyday killings often overshadowed by media coverage of mass shootings, and reshaped what policymakers see as priorities. From a plucky startup with seven employees, *The Trace* has grown to a newsroom of 25, and they remain the only news outlet of this scale focused exclusively on guns and gun violence.

Having received more than \$2 million in support from the Kendeda Fund between 2017 and 2023, *The Trace* has broadened its supporters and grown increasingly independent. According to Burnett, more institutional funders support them every year, and they are working actively to increase the number of individual donors as well. *The Trace* has always been transparent about its **editorial independence** and the sources of its funding. Since the publication's founding, the share of the budget supported by the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund has dropped from 99 percent to 30 percent.

“I don't want anyone to ever have to hesitate to partner with us because they ask questions about that funding,” Burnett explained.

Burnett identified several near-term priorities for *The Trace*. Because few outlets have the expertise to deeply understand gun violence and the journalistic knack for communicating about it, *The Trace* plays a pivotal role in translating complicated public health and criminology findings into stories that general readers can appreciate and understand.

That's become more important since Congress's rejection of the Dickey Amendment, which prohibited federal funding for gun violence-related research from 1996 until 2018. With state and federal lawmakers again funding gun violence research after a freeze of more than two decades, "We're going to have the means for greater public understanding and more evidence-based policy," says Burnett. "But only if journalism figures out which of the studies are most significant and how to cover them well — not hyperbolically, not superficially, and in a way that is still accessible to lay-people and policymakers."

**Burnett is particularly interested in evaluations of place-based interventions shown to significantly reduce violence locally**, such as cleaning up vacant lots and blighted buildings. In debates about intervening with people most at risk of violence or addressing "root causes" in the broader community, Burnett wonders if such measures can "break the binary."

Another priority includes digging deeper in areas where this is much to learn but little transparency, such as the gun industry. The settlement that survivors of the Sandy Hook shooting **achieved with Remington**, and increasing pressure on insurers and banks, have created "more favorable conditions to scrutinize the industry," he says. And the more eyes on it, the better. **"If you had two or three people investigating a gun company where there's suspicion of wrongdoing, I do think you see more big breakthroughs that way."**

Burnett is proud of how *The Trace* has lived up to its commitment to cover violence through its **local reporting initiative** as individual communities experience it, and he hopes to deepen this work. The outlet has also made an effort to seek out the expertise of community violence intervention practitioners. Paying attention to everyday violence becomes a radical act, making it worthy of public attention. In the past, mainstream media outlets rarely covered public health models of violence prevention, and even now, they do so "kind of as a novelty," Burnett says. *The Trace* sets a higher bar: "to take the public health model and its practitioners as seriously as law enforcement."

**The Kendeda Fund  
has invested**

**6  
Years**

**2<sub>M</sub>**

**and more than  
\$2 million in  
The Trace**



**Perhaps the path forward involves incentivizing cross-sector projects framed not as reducing gun violence, but instead as promoting safety and justice.**

— James Burnett



Burnett admits that *The Trace* has further to go on its community-centered reporting and public health initiatives. **Aside from a few works of anthropology, he doesn't think any observer has gotten authentic insight into the lived experience of people affected by gun violence** — “the whole reality of being a person or a family caught up in the heart of the crisis.” He added, “To get close to that, ethically, responsibly, thoughtfully — that’s something that animates me.”

The Trace leads alongside a growing number of single-subject nonprofit news outlets that have sprung up in recent decades, including *The Marshall Project*, *Grist*, and *Inside Climate News*, but they are all still adapting to what this business model requires. One critical and challenging area, Burnett says, is retaining staff, who collectively hold expertise that is critical to the enterprise. “When we lose a reporter from *The Trace*, we can’t go hire a gun violence reporter from somewhere else,” he says. “There just aren’t a ton of journalists who are deeply immersed in this issue.” (Out of similar interest in growing the ranks, the Kendeda Fund previously made significant investments in a public radio initiative called **Guns & America**. The three-year project anchored at WAMU, the NPR affiliate in Washington DC, helped train and cultivate journalists in ten stations nationwide).

And while *The Trace* strives to train and support its existing reporters, it has to help them thrive on a uniquely difficult beat. “We only cover this one thing,” he points out, and can’t relieve reporters by shifting them from the trauma of gun violence to a more light-hearted desk. “It’s not like we do arts.”

**To ensure the longevity of The Trace and have confidence the work will keep moving forward, Burnett focuses on converting readers into donors.** While contributions have doubled since 2021, that still represents only 5 percent of total revenue. He’s also hoping for more support from regional foundations for local reporting, to launch additional news products that engage a broader swath of readers, and to cultivate a larger and more active board.



**“You’ve got a whole generation of people who are pretty civically engaged, they’re just not getting their information from journalism...”**

— James Burnett

Strategizing for the future doesn't end there. The news audience and means of reaching them have never been more complex or fast-changing, and "figuring out how to reach, inform and motivate younger people" is one of the biggest conundrums. "You've got a whole generation of people who are pretty civically engaged, they're just not getting their information from journalism," he says. "When the content unit moves from a text article to a TikTok video, how does that translate to investigative journalism?"

**To drive down America's rate of gun violence will require a whole-of-society approach, Burnett says, not just the occasional spasm of effort in the wake of a mass shooting.** "I think that happens when the intersections between gun violence and core values — safety, justice, democracy — are more broadly understood and keenly felt," he says. And that means going beyond the confines of federal legislative change. "More people will apply sustained pressure for change when they understand that solutions don't require the elusive support of 60 senators — that, in fact, there are a lot of existing interventions that could be even more effective if properly scaled and implemented."

He observes that philanthropy funds many things that "feel both bigger and less risky" — less politicized and more likely to yield tangible results. It's, therefore, critical to convince funders of the extensive and harmful effects of gun violence and that the problem can be solved.

Philanthropists promoting intersectionality in gun violence typically focus on its "root causes" — structural racism and entrenched poverty — but **Burnett says that gun violence itself warrants focus to further a whole host of other issues.** "If you fund criminal justice reform, you need to fund gun violence prevention because, as we are seeing right now, increases in gun crime will erode support for broader alternatives to arrest, prosecution, and incarceration. If you fund education, you need to fund gun violence prevention because we know that shootings decrease test scores. If you fund community mental health, you want to reduce trauma, which means decreasing both shootings and the threat of shootings. If you fund the arts, and you want to ensure packed houses after the return to live performances, you care about how crime affects people's willingness to venture out at night."

**Burnett acknowledges this is easier said than done, but offers an idea for future funders: "Perhaps the path forward involves incentivizing cross-sector projects framed not as reducing gun violence, but instead as promoting safety and justice." ■**

# Tim Daly

## *The Fund for a Safer Future*



Tim Daly  
*Board Chair*

**Tim Daly** is humble enough to recognize that just a decade ago, the gun violence prevention movement was running on fumes and essentially blind. “We did not know nearly enough about many of the issues from a research point of view,” Daly explains. “We really weren’t all that data-informed.”

The federal government had effectively abandoned science on gun violence prevention, and private foundations and individual donors willing to support it were scarce. The Joyce Foundation, headed by Ellen Alberding was among the few foundations willing to lean into the research void.

## FUND FOR A SAFER FUTURE

“[The Joyce Foundation] was playing an outsized and essential role in funding a lot of the infrastructure that existed — and it was not nearly enough,” said Daly. Other donors occasionally made one-off discretionary grants, sometimes drawn from special funds, but few were sustained or strategic.

The Joyce Foundation was among those seeking to organize the philanthropic community into a more potent force. Daly pointed to [a 2011 commentary](#) published in The Chronicle of Philanthropy entitled “Philanthropy must challenge the idea that gun violence can’t be stopped.” That year the foundation and four other funders pooled \$1 million to start the Fund for a Safer Future, a new donor collaborative designed as a place where funders interested in solving America’s gun violence crisis could convene, collaborate, and co-invest. And over the years, it began to work.

A donor collaborative allows its member foundations to spread the risk of their investments, achieve economies of scale, and insulate themselves from a hot-button topic by giving them “an arm’s length relationship to the things that the collaborative is funding,” Daly says.

**But the real key to FSF’s success was how it helped philanthropies evaluate investment opportunities.** Foundations generally deliberated over grantees at length before investing, and the brief bursts of public attention following mass shootings rarely allowed for this painstaking due diligence. FSF “jumpstarted that research,” Daly observes, allowing donors to push money out the door even while they continued to learn and engage more deeply.

The Kendeda Fund, which joined FSF in 2014, was exemplary of this. “They came looking to understand the landscape, spend some money immediately, and got so engaged that their representative at FSF has ascended into a leadership role.” Between 2014 and 2023, Kendeda would ultimately invest nearly \$2 million in FSF.

Overall, the group’s momentum has been significant. During the last ten years, **FSF has seen total direct grantmaking by its members climb from \$1 million in 2011 to \$4.5 million in 2022**, and aligned grantmaking has rocketed upward even further, from \$4.9 million in 2011 to \$36.5 million in 2022.

Daly sees the impact of FSF on many fronts. The science they supported has created a crucial base of evidence about extreme risk protection orders, a policy innovation largely unknown in 2011 that is now law in **21 states**. “But for FSF, the depth of that research and knowledge would not have existed, and I don’t think that we would have some of these [extreme risk protective orders] in all the states where we now see them,” says Daly.

According to Daly, FSF accelerates members’ learning about the challenges of investing in solutions to gun violence. “Any time a new funder comes into the space, they have grand visions about working with gun owners and the gun industry to try and find common ground,” he says, including himself in that mix. **“We have learned, with more sophistication, the clear interests of some of our political opponents on the issue.”**

Amid the nation’s ongoing racial reckoning, and reinforced by calls from the **Community Justice Action Fund** and other advocates, FSF has also increasingly sought to support minority-led organizations and to prioritize dimensions of gun violence that impact Black and LatinX communities. “You get to this point in FSF where equity has now become a driving consideration for philanthropic leaders,” Daly says. He also points at that righting historical imbalances takes time, citing the lengthy process to build a generation of scientists more representative of the country as a whole.

**The Kendeda Fund has invested**

**9**  
**Years**

**2**<sub>M</sub>  
**and almost \$2 million in**  
**Fund for a Safer Future**

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— Tim Daly



The Kendeda Fund led efforts to raise the visibility of FSF, including a grant to create FSF’s first website to expand its visibility and reach. “The website is essential for recruiting other funders,” he says. Kendeda also helped develop “the ‘storyline,’ to surface the key intersection points” that appeal to funders focused on adjacent issues like criminal justice reform, public health or democracy. “One adjacent issue we’re starting to see more interest in is **the intersection of gun violence with education**,” says Daly. “Communities are asking: how can our young people learn If they just witnessed some terrible violence?”

The federal and state governments have begun funding gun violence science and programs, with some estimating public funds for community violence intervention strategies at over \$2 billion. “It’s an order of magnitude that private philanthropy, high-net-worth individuals, could never touch,” says Daly. But he believes private philanthropic dollars are categorically different and still crucial.

**“It can be more flexible and faster,” he says, and isn’t subject to indirect costs that universities levy, which inflate projects by as much as 50 percent.** With so many needs calling for FSF’s attention, the collaborative has to be careful about what they prioritize, and not every grant will appeal to all 35 members. “We have to spread that peanut butter a little bit thin sometimes.”

Daly is proud of some state-based infrastructure FSF has built in places like Texas that need a reliable local funder and believes the collaborative could and should do more. “I think that could be one place where, if we had a more targeted strategy towards specific states or sub-issues, we could drive more impact.”

**Daly also feels that evaluating community violence interventions will be crucial in coming years, while acknowledging the risk that some publicly lauded programs could fail.** “We have every reason to believe that those spending American Rescue Plan Act dollars for (community violence intervention) strategies were doing so with fidelity, and they had specific strategies—but that’s a lot of money in a short amount of time.”



**“Communities are asking: how can our young people learn If they just witnessed some terrible violence?”**

— Tim Daly



To ensure FSF achieves critical mass while remaining responsive to its members' needs, Daly says the collaborative needs to more firmly demonstrate their collective experience that **“the reputational risk of working on the issue is overstated,” and that impact is possible.**

While some institutions may have historically been hesitant to fund such a controversial issue out of fear for their reputation, Daly says this has not played out for its members. To ensure FSF achieves critical mass while also remaining responsive to its members' needs, **Daly says the collaborative needs to more clearly demonstrate that being involved has the potential to create more stability on so many issues that funders care about with countless entry points for every kind of foundation. ■**



# Greg Jackson

## *Community Justice*



Greg Jackson  
*Executive Director*

**For [Greg Jackson](#), the connection between America’s urgent gun violence crisis and its deep-rooted racial inequities is personal. In April 2013, when he was the national field director for the Democratic Congressional Committee, he was walking home in Washington, DC one night when gunfire broke out nearby.**

**He was hit by a stray bullet and rushed to a hospital** — but before he entered surgery to repair two arteries, police interrogated him about the incident while he was bleeding out. At a moment of maximum vulnerability, he was being mistreated, he felt, because of racist stereotypes that associated criminality with his dark skin.



That misperception was part of what inspired Amber Goodwin, a former [Giffords](#) policy director, to found Community Justice in 2016. At that time, there were few Black-led gun violence prevention organizations, and none exclusively focused on national policy change. Both Goodwin and Jackson, who joined Community Justice as national advocacy director in 2019, saw spikes in interest for gun violence prevention following mass shootings that were usually “dominated by suburban, privileged activists,” and woefully unrepresentative of the Black and LatinX people most affected by the problem.

These characteristics allowed the movement to hold onto dangerous misperceptions not dissimilar to those Jackson had experienced in the emergency room the night he was shot. **Among them, that gun violence in Black communities stemmed from a culture of criminality, one that could only be corrected with force.** “It was very pro-police,” recalls Jackson, who would go on to replace Goodwin as executive director of the organization in 2021. “In my opinion, it was completely oblivious to how the criminal legal system was destroying Black and Brown communities.”

It could be an uncomfortable position to hold. Sometimes in meetings with partner organizations, “we would talk about the gun violence crisis, but I’d be the only one with lived experience and the only one with any type of connection to the pain,” he says. “If I was at a women’s health meeting at Planned Parenthood, I wouldn’t expect it to be full of guys, right?”

**As he saw it, correcting this imbalance meant changing access to funding because white-led foundations largely ignored or minimized local groups directly affected by violence.** “For people from Chicago, to get to Washington, DC for a lobby day is a huge undertaking if you have no resources. Whereas people in Sandy Hook were getting millions of dollars and were already privileged and getting flown out in jets.”

The Kendeda Fund was among a group of donors who bucked that trend to give Community Justice the resources they needed to get started and sustained that support over the next five years for a total investment of more than \$500,000. The new organization quickly established itself as a vital and authoritative voice in the broader GVP movement.

Jackson recalls an early breakthrough in September 2019, after his team identified a few champions in the Congressional Black Caucus who helped organize **a rare Congressional hearing on community violence**. “We just crushed it, and that opened a lot of doors.” That helped solidify community violence’s place on the agenda, he said. At a forum of Democratic presidential candidates the **following month**, “every single presidential candidate had to say something about what they’re doing about Black and Brown communities.”

But the inequities that run through the GVP movement continued to do harm.

**“There were moments where violence impacted our communities, and white-led groups took the glory, and they also took the money; it was extremely frustrating,”** Jackson says. For example, in February 2020, after Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed in Brunswick, Georgia, Community Justice **launched a campaign** to repeal state ‘stand your ground’ laws shown to increase homicide rates. But a larger gun violence prevention organization immediately overshadowed their efforts by running a fundraiser from the same moment. “So, they raised millions of dollars for reacting to a harm to a Black body,” he says, “and really disrupted our entire campaign.”

**The Kendeda Fund  
has invested**

**5  
Years**

**500<sub>K</sub>**

**and \$500,000 in  
Community Justice**

**We are in a very dominant role within the gun violence movement, and a lot of issues that we care about are now front and center.**

— Greg Jackson



Community Justice has decided to call out mistreatment rather than be cowed into accepting it, cultivating what Jackson calls a “culture of brutal honesty.” For example, when the Biden Administration left them and other Black-led organizations out of early meetings, they **took it to the press**. “There have been a lot of moments where we have been very frank and aggressive, about calling out organizations when they overstep or bulldoze or offend or oppress.” **That may create some discomfort, he reasons, but it makes for a stronger movement in the long run.** “Being a good partner is important. And that wasn’t obviously important, I would argue, five years ago.”

It’s easy to be isolated, Jackson says, so *The Trace* has been an invaluable outside validator. “Because they were more tuned into violence as a whole, they were able to shine a light on some of these inequities and dig deeper into some of the neglected challenges and solutions.” *The Trace’s* sustained focus and commitment lent Community Justice more legitimacy, he explains. “So, it’s not just the oppressed telling the story of their oppression. It was a third party, if you will, highlighting some of the big breakdowns on this issue within the movement. And I think that was a huge help.”

As Community Justice’s star has risen, the Biden Administration has increasingly made community violence **an explicit priority**. “Now we are in a very dominant role within the gun violence movement, and a lot of issues that we care about are now front and center.” That’s reflected in rapidly expanding public and private sector support for community violence intervention, **strategies which were starved for resources just five years ago but are now seeing billions of dollars of state and federal investment.**

As recently as the Obama administration, Jackson says, Black anti-violence activists were seated at the rear of public events. “Biden will never have an event where it’s majority white talking about gun violence. He would never put Black folks in the back—he wouldn’t even consider it.” Jackson believes the funders have shifted, too.




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**“Biden will never have an event where it’s majority white talking about gun violence.”**

— Greg Jackson

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The Joyce Foundation, the Langeloth Foundation, and the Open Society “always had a toe in the water,” he says, “but some of them really leaned in much harder the last few years.”

There is room to grow further, though, and a desperate need for it. Jackson still doesn't think the scale of necessary investment is generally recognized. “We're still tripping over each other for scraps,” he says, trying to obtain small localized grants when it's a national investment that is required. “We need a Nike. We need a Tesla. We need billionaires at the table because this is a billionaire problem.”

The coronavirus pandemic opened his eyes to what an appropriate response to a public health crisis looks like — and what a public health response looks like. “There's a shit-ton of money that we can move when we need to. And there's also a very complex strategy to address COVID-19 that we were able to implement. **Gun violence should be tackled the same way. Even though it's complex, we should move the resources.** And we should think about all the different elements in a sophisticated design, a comprehensive approach to addressing the violence, and implement it.”

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**I want to keep running but I need a bigger team and there needs to be more people running alongside me in order for this to be sustained.**

— Greg Jackson

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Jackson has some specific objectives in mind. The GVP movement remains unbalanced, “still overwhelmingly people focused on the gun industry and focused on the NRA,” even though much of the momentum nationwide in the last few years has been in addressing community violence. **“The few organizations that are stepping into that space and owning the moment are going to burn out. And I think I'm probably one of them because I do feel burnt out.”** He continues, “I want to keep running but I need a bigger team and there needs to be more people running alongside me in order for this to be sustained.”

Another particular need Jackson observes is from young groups, including his own, who need support to grow. Having taken the reins from Community Justice’s founder, he experienced firsthand the growing pains and stressors of that transition and felt that some could have been avoided with greater financial, management, and training support. **“One major lesson is that the organization’s core vision must be very clear to ensure that while the organization is evolving through different leadership, there’s an aligned vision to transition to.”**

Jackson observes that he and other movement leaders arrived at their positions with formidable advocacy skills but little experience running effective, sustainable organizations. “No one ever sat down with me and helped coach me through how to build a board that’s effective and can help strengthen our organization,” he said. “No one ever said, ‘Hey, as you’re developing your org chart and staffing, here are some key positions you need. Here are the things that you should be looking for.’ No one says, ‘Here are some traps that you need to avoid when working with corporations.’”

The underinvestment in Black-led groups focused on community violence has also left some geographic holes, particularly in the South.

**“It takes some bravery from the funders to go into neglected spaces,” he says.**

When Community Justice staff went to Atlanta, Ga., to meet with local anti-violence groups there, they learned they were the only national organization that had ever done so. “And they just decided the future of our Senate, right? So, what happens in Memphis and in Baton Rouge and Charleston, South Carolina, all these places where there is a huge crisis, but we just don’t have anybody brave enough? We don’t have enough folks going into these communities, searching for those leaders, and trying to figure out who can help.”



Greg Jackson appearing on *The Problem with Jon Stewart*



He also saw a deficit of LatinX-led organizations. “You can’t always lump Black and Brown together; there are different impacts,” he says, “and we’ve neglected some of the solutions that are needed, especially the intersections with immigration.”

In recent years criminal justice reformers have made promising, if limited, advances. But Jackson fears a backlash and a return to a paradigm of “law and order”—particularly because such reforms are being scapegoated for spikes in violence that followed on the heels of the pandemic, and panicked elected officials are prepared to latch onto whatever idea is in front of them. **“The movement has not created or presented smart and effective messaging for politicians. We haven’t presented them with enough policy solutions on how to address this crisis.”**

He compared it to the 1990s when changing drug markets and a surge in youth violence precipitated a public health crisis — and the nation responded by growing and hardening the criminal justice system instead. “I think we’re in another moment just like that and I’m really, really concerned that people don’t see that,” he says.

Jackson was somewhat critical of the priorities set by progressive advocates, including a too-narrow focus on reducing shootings by police, which he says “eats up” a lot of the oxygen for advocacy on public safety. **“If you look at the lives lost to police violence versus other forms of violence, this is not the number one challenge that Black and Brown folks are facing right now. But the media and the funding community, frankly, have centered it.”**

Whereas abolitionists have pushed to “defund the police,” Jackson feels that law enforcement “definitely” has a role in reducing violence, albeit a limited one. “The most effective version of policing is still a reactive strategy,” he explains. “I don’t think we’ll ever end gun violence by having the best police force in imagination or history. We need to make sure that we are putting more attention into proactive, prevention-focused efforts and not just this reactive entity that’s already dysfunctional.”

Jackson also feels that services for survivors have been terribly neglected. **“We’ve failed victims. Our policies have. Our government has. And our movement has.** For there to be so many survivors in this movement but no one focused on victim services is pretty embarrassing.”

The gun violence prevention movement still needs to wrestle with its inequities, including by bringing more Black and LatinX people to the top of its ranks. **“We need people who are impacted to be empowered to lead the charge. That’s just how it should be—and that’s also what I would argue is the most effective way.”** He adds, **“we need to make sure the movement is reflective of those being impacted, not just diverse for the sake of being diverse.”** ■

# Igor Volsky

## *Guns Down America*

Igor Volsky  
*Executive Director*

## **Igor Volsky has a knack for seeing clearly and speaking unflinchingly. That is what brought him to the gun violence prevention movement in the first place.**

In late 2015, as a progressive strategist and communicator at the Center for American Progress, Volsky used Twitter to **excoriate** a string of politicians who responded to a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California with nothing but “thoughts and prayers.” The simple act of identifying and calling out their common hypocrisy gave a jolt to the gun violence prevention movement which, in the wake of such tragedies, can often feel caught in a hopeless cycle of despair and apathy.

### **GUNS DOWN AMERICA**

A few months later, Volsky would draw attention to the **campaign contributions from the NRA accepted by each Senator** who voted against a bill to expand background checks. Movement leaders encouraged Volsky to leave his job and help build a new organization that could continue the clever research, strategic targeting, and unsparing tone. “I’m not a digital person,” he told them. “If I’m going to do this, I would like to run it.” The Kendeda Fund was among the group’s first supporters and would go on to give \$725,000 between 2016-2023.

From the sidelines, Volsky had observed the gun violence prevention movement’s fledgling attempts to hold mainstream corporations accountable, such as Moms Demand Action campaigns to press **Starbucks** and **Kroger** into barring public carry at their stores. But those were the exceptions.

“Our messaging was still stuck in this conciliatory place,” Volsky says.

**The GVP movement’s outrage and willingness to adopt tone and tactics to match seemed to wax and wane with the news cycle, where concern about gun violence only surged after mass shootings.** Volsky recognized that it didn’t accurately reflect how the public felt about the issue. Many people, particularly those most deeply engaged, never flagged in their concern. They wanted to see organizations pushing more ambitious plans that went beyond background checks for all gun sales. “The movement was far behind where the public was. And early on, we talked a lot about bringing the movement in line with public opinion.”

Volsky partnered with seasoned operative Mark Glaze, the visionary strategist who helped build Everytown for Gun Safety and saw a similar need for a new organization willing to engage in combative and creative tactics. (Although Glaze would be essential in founding Guns Down America, he eventually left the organization before passing away in 2021.)

**Relative to other progressive causes, Volsky thought the gun violence movement was immature and undifferentiated.. “What struck me when it came to guns was how similar everybody was.”** At the Center for American Progress, he’d seen how the movements to expand health care, LGBTQ rights, and immigration included a broader array of voices, including more strident ones, and were stronger for it. “They sometimes were at odds with each other, but ultimately, they were complementary in achieving whatever their goals were. [The gun violence movement] just didn’t have that. So that’s what intrigued me to try and do this work differently. I really felt you needed that diversity to make progress.”

Guns Down America launched in August 2016 and was among the first groups focused on how **guns foster fear and intimidation around polling places**. Volsky and others anticipated that Hillary Clinton would be elected president that November, and he assumed Guns Down would play the role of a ‘left flank’ on gun reform, reinforcing the rest of the movement in pursuit of a more ambitious agenda. “The first setback was that Trump was elected,” Volsky says. **Suddenly Guns Down found itself on the uncompromising fringe of a contentious issue in a political environment that was more deeply partisan than ever.**

That didn’t slow Guns Down America, which was adept at tracing responsibility for gun violence to mainstream businesses such as insurers, banks and retailers who preferred to shirk responsibility. In an early campaign, the organization partnered with the civil rights organization **Color of Change** and focused on “Carry-Guard” insurance, a product marketed by the NRA which offered gun owners protection from legal costs were they to shoot someone. In 2018,

**The Kendeda Fund has invested**

**8**  
**Years**

**725**<sub>K</sub>

**and \$725,000 in**  
**Guns Down**  
**America**

**The (GVP) movement was far behind where the public was. And early on, we talked a lot about bringing the movement in line with public opinion.**

— Igor Volsky



**insurers who underwrote the product began abandoning the program**, and in 2020, under investigation by the New York Attorney General, the **NRA halted it entirely**.

In 2019, Guns Down issued a report card on U.S. banks' ties to the firearm industry that received **national news coverage in the biggest outlets** and gave financial institutions a new sense of accountability. **“I had all these banks reach out to us trying to prove to me that they were the greatest ally of gun violence prevention that’s ever existed,” says Volsky.**

Later that year, following a mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart, Volsky’s organization began pressuring America’s largest retailer **to stop gun sales**. The retailer temporarily halted them for several months, setting the tone for politicians. “We really helped push the 2020 presidential primary candidates to think far more broadly and boldly about their GVP platforms,” he says.

Biden’s presidential victory in 2020 put an ally in the White House, and some advocates expected big changes. For Guns Down, the reality has been less transformational than they hoped, so the organization pivoted to the position it anticipated holding four years earlier: challenging the White House and other movement members on their lip service in lieu of clear initiatives. “We have been doing a lot of asking, ‘Is (President Biden) living up to his promises?’” Volsky explains.

They’ve also continued to float innovative ways of bringing accountability to the corporate world. According to Volsky, the group worked for three years to get credit cards to **add a merchant category code for gun dealers** to flag suspicious purchasing patterns.

Volsky concedes that Guns Down America has remained relatively small operationally, which he attributes to his interest in and focus on campaigns rather than building the organization itself. Unlike other leaders in the field, he is a political operative rather than a survivor of gun violence. And he said he has to fight to convince progressive donors because **“guns are (still) not core to the progressive movement or the progressive political identity.”**



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**Still, the impact of Guns Down America goes beyond any single policy change or corporate actor, he says, by creating a stronger and more attuned set of corporate norms.** “There’s a greater awareness that businesses have to contend with this issue in some kind of way,” he says. “Before, they didn’t consider this issue the same way they considered immigration or climate. I think we’ve moved it up on the list.”

The number of corporations openly flouting gun violence prevention advocates, for example, by enrolling in the NRA’s Business Alliance, has shrunk. Now he sees more need to develop ways for them to take affirmatively good positions. “The movement as a whole struggles to get the corporate ‘good actors’ — the [shoe company] TOMS, the Dick’s [Sporting Goods] of the world — to start making a real business case for gun violence prevention the same way they do for climate.”

**Going forward, he hopes the philanthropic community invests more deeply in innovative strategies that break from convention.** “To truly turn the tide, we have to abandon familiar and comfortable tactics that don’t reflect the reality of today’s politics. That requires sustained investment in voices and organizations who do things differently.”



Igor Volsky appearing on MSNBC

Volsky also feels like there is more work to do to change the tenor of the gun violence prevention movement, away from obsequiousness towards gun owners and more aligned with the scientific evidence about risks posed by firearms. “You still have folks running at the news cycle talking about how much they love the Second Amendment.” He sees his role as truth-teller. **“Part of the reason I exist in this space is to be honest about guns, the fact that they’re dangerous in almost anybody’s hands, and the fact that there’s no such thing as a responsible gun owner and that we should make all guns harder to get.”** ■

20,278

homicides

24,090

suicides



## In 2022 there were more than 44,368 gun deaths in the United States, including 20,278 homicides and 24,090 suicides. Do you think those figures will be higher or lower in 2032, and why?



**Igor Volsky**, *Guns Down America*: “Given rising gun sales (rooted in the American belief that guns will help keep your family safer), a stacked conservative Supreme Court, and the seeming disinterest of the gun violence prevention movement as a whole to draw on a different playbook, **I fear gun deaths will ultimately be higher in 2032.**”



**Greg Jackson**, *Community Justice*: “While the crisis of violence is likely to increase in the next 2-3 years, **I strongly believe we will see reductions in homicide over the next 9-10 years** as homicide reduction-focused strategies evolve.”



**James Burnett**, *The Trace*: “I believe the numbers will be lower. I have to believe that, in order to keep doing my job, but it’s also my sincere reading of the horizon. Recent increases in research funding will improve knowledge of what drives gun violence and what can reduce it. The upswing in public dollars for community violence interventions should produce at least some success stories that bolster the arguments for future spending. I think we’ll continue to see opportunities for bipartisan action on firearm suicides. The movement itself has built critical infrastructure over the past decade. Is our collective response to gun violence yet commensurate to the problem? Not yet. **But the ingredients for greater progress are in place, and I’m optimistic that fewer lives will be lost to or changed by shootings in the years ahead.**”



**Tim Daly**, *Fund for a Safer Future*: “My honest assessment: Given the current trajectory, those numbers will be higher in 2032 — because of the extraordinary volume of guns in this country, the supply of which exploded since 2020, and which continues to grow. That said, my answer should not be interpreted to mean we are not making an impact in reducing gun deaths. **I have every confidence that our collective work is having an enormous impact in keeping those numbers lower than they otherwise would be.**”



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